

## The Mecha Trilogy

by NetRaptor

Category: Sonic the Hedgehog

Genre: Drama

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2000-05-03 08:00:00

Updated: 2000-05-03 08:00:00

Packaged: 2016-04-27 16:02:30

Rating: K

Chapters: 1

Words: 17,366

Publisher: [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)

Summary: If Metal Sonic became a good guy ... three stories lumped into one file. Beware of sappy content.

## The Mecha Trilogy

### The Mecha Trilogy

Story one: Love your enemy

---

By K. M.  
Hollar

---

The Trilogy comes roughly two months after Emerald Madness, but is separate from the other stories. Mecha will remain a bad guy in all other stories, but these three will explore what kind of character he would become if forced to live with the Freedom Fighters, with no access to Robotnik or his minions.

---

He stalked through the forest as if he owned it, fists clenched at his sides, head down. His manner dared anyone to toy with him--he would rip their lungs out, no questions asked.

In the microchips that passed as his heart he entertained a ferocious anger. Anger that he had set foot in the Great Forest, a spot he had sworn never to enter again. Anger at his breaking of this oath. And

mad fury at the hedgehog he had come to destroy.

Metal Sonic had long had a smouldering hatred for Sonic, his arch-enemy/rival/nemesis. That hatred had, for a while, been channeled toward Robo Knux, who had humiliated Mecha and sent him fleeing the dying Robotropolis like a common criminal. It was in the peak of this rage that Mecha had isolated the bio-metal alloy and constructed an army of robot fiends; not to attack the Freedom Fighters, but to wipe Robo Knuckles off the planet. But Sonic and company had destroyed his entire army and escaped unharmed, leaving Mecha with nothing but his life, his hatred and the formula for the bio-metal he had worked so hard for.

The robot had returned to the forest to exact revenge on his enemy.

He paused for the first time in miles to scan for life-forms. The woods were alive with birdsong, flowers, budding leaves and spring, but Mecha had no appreciation for such things. He COULD not appreciate nature; it was not in his programming to admire anything but technological achievements.

His high-powered scans swept the woods, searching for sentient life. He saw no one, but his sensors did detect the river not far from where he stood.

Something deep within his memory banks registered: Knothole village was near the river. While he had been there, villagers had often traveled to and from the river. Perhaps he could find their trail. He set off again, red eyes glowing menacingly in his dark face.

Presently he parted the brush and stepped onto the pebbly shore. The river ran by at his feet, muddy, roiling and noisy with spring run-off. All the robot cared about was how exposed he was there. He moved back into the brush, crouched and tossed a tentative scan about the area. It seemed heavily forested. He began to scan thoroughly, looking for anything that resembled a path. To his sinister delight he found one, and it appeared quite well-travelled. It was on the far bank.

Metal Sonic stepped into the open, powered up his hoverjets and swept grandly across the water. He cared little for the liquid flowing beneath him. He had perished once by water in his lifetime, and had no desire to repeat the performance. In fact, he hated water almost as much as he did Sonic, if that were possible. It was one of the few things he could not intimidate or control.

He set himself down lightly on the far shore, extinguished his jets and stepped onto the path. His raw visual sensors could not penetrate the forest, but his scanners detected two life-forms moving down it toward him. It would be foolish to meet them and have them inform the village. He would conceal himself and see if he could overhear anything they said.

Mecha backed into the brush that flanked the trail and activated his cloaking device. His blue steel body wavered and faded to one-eighth its natural opacity. He was not completely invisible, but if he avoided strong sunlight and made no sound it was doubtful he would ever be discovered. The only disadvantage to this was the large

amounts of energy the device required. Often he was forced to shut down all but the most necessary systems to keep it running, putting him to the robotic equivalent of sleep. Because of this he seriously disliked using it and avoided it whenever he could.

After a few minutes his hearing sensors detected the sound of two voices. Female voices. He felt a tremor of revulsion pass through his motion center--he hated females. Every female organism he had ever encountered had caused him nothing but trouble, and their male defenders acted as if protecting them from red-eyed robots was their bold duty.

The two in question came into sight, walking side by side and talking unconcernedly. Mecha identified them at once: Serena Hedgehog and Zephyr Winstrom. The two females he happened to hate above all others! Serena had been the indirect cause of his destruction by water, and later by fire (or laser). Zephyr had been his prisoner, but escaped and was instrumental in the destruction of the bio-bot army. Needless to say, he seriously considered stepping out and blowing them away. He immediately overruled that as impractical; the discovery of their torched carcasses would set Knothole on the alert, and any element of surprise he had would be lost. Instead he activated his spy-hearing and tuned into the girls' conversation.

The hedgehog and echidna had pulled a couple fishing poles out of a hollow log beside the river and were baiting the hooks. Serena was squealing in disgust at having to impale the worm on her hook, and Zephyr did it for her out of pity. Mecha, watching the latter narrowly, noticed that her right hand was de-robotized. He was quite sure he had missed nothing from her throat down. Did the Freedom Fighters have a de-robotizer? If so, why hadn't they de-robotized the rest of her? But now they had made their casts and were beginning to talk.

"I can't get over how much fun this place is," the echidna commented, seating herself carefully on the sand.

The violet hedgehog sat down beside her. "Fun? What's fun about Knothole?"

"You guys tell stories at night before bed, we go fishing and barbecue afterward, we watch your brother show off his hyper powers, Slasher takes you flying wherever you want and as high as you want, we've got Knuckles promising a big camp-out on the island this summer ... its like a resort or something. And you guys do this all the time?"

Serena was grinning, and reeled in a few inches of line before answering. "Not ALL the time ... its sorta like spring fever. We've been inside all winter, and we can't wait to start our summer stuff again! It's gonna be lazy around here with no Robotnik to pick on."

"That's what you think," Mecha thought.

The two chatted idly for a while along those lines and the robot became bored. Then Zephyr remarked that a storm was brewing. Serena asked her how she knew, pointing at the cloudless sky. The echidna smiled. "Dad always called me a living barometer. I can feel the air

pressure changes on my ears." She yawned on purpose. "It's dropping-- low pressure means bad weather. It'll probably rain tonight or tomorrow."

Curious, Metal Sonic consulted his own internal barometer and found it was indeed dropping. He had not thought that living organisms could detect minute changes in air pressure. He had learned something.

Zephyr was saying, "Yeah, I got real sensitive back on XR-7, when you had to know when a tornado was approaching without being able to see it."

Serena stared at her. "Tornados? You think that's what this storm is?"

The echidna laughed. "No, I didn't mean that! Tornados suck air into the base and they have an area of very low pressure around them. Usually you feel the pressure change before you see the funnel, 'cause it might be behind a hill or something. That way you have a chance to get out of the way before it hits. Wait a minute, I think I got a bite!" The end of her rod twitched convulsively. She leaped to her feet and began to reel it in, Serena shouting encouragement.

Mecha looked on in distaste. Biological females took pleasure in such foolish things! As if anyone cared about catching a water-dwelling organism. He was more interested in learning if they had a de-robotizer operating somewhere in the village.

The girls said nothing of interest for the rest of the excursion. They did, however, catch several more fish. Then they trotted back down the trail in triumph, bearing their shining catch and singing at the top of their lungs. Mecha watched them go in disgust.

It was a relief to turn off the cloaking device and feel the power flow back into his drained systems. He would not use it again until his batteries had recharged.

He cautiously stepped onto the path and began to walk down it, keeping his scanners on full sweep. If someone came he would have time to conceal himself. He had no intention of being discovered before he was ready.

\* \* \*

Evening came and Knothole was bathed in the aroma of cooking fish. Everyone went about with their mouths watering and stomachs mournfully empty. Sally, Antoine and Slasher were standing about the barbecue pit, basting and turning the white meat.

Rotor had holed up in his workshop, as usual, and was tinkering with a dismantled hoverbike engine to get his mind off his hunger. There came a knock at the door, and it opened without waiting for a response. Sonic leaned in, looking happy and alert. "Care if I come in?"

Rotor indicated a stool near the door with his wire-cutters. "Have a seat."

Sonic did and remarked, "I'm so hungry my stomach thinks my throat's been cut! How about you?"

Rotor gave him a wry grin. "Watch it or I'll drool on the floor. Did you want something?"

"As a matter of fact I did. The termites found me again-- they're in the rafters in my hut."

Rotor sobered. "Really? Those darn bugs--remind me to mix you up some spray after dinner."

But the two forgot completely.

First there came the jubilant feasting on roasted fish and hamburgers (it was one of the few times Sonic ate something other than chili dogs). Then came the after-dinner clean-up, followed by the construction of the summer-night bonfire. Zephyr surprised them all by producing a guitar from her hut and serenading them in round after round of campfire songs.

The merriment was abruptly cut short by lightning forking across the sky and a bass-drumroll of thunder. "Isn't it always the way!" Tails exclaimed as everyone hurried to gather up plates, cups and chairs. "Picnics are ALWAYS ruined by rain!" It had grown quite dark, and the storm-driven wind was beginning to blow. Everyone rushed for the community hut to finish up their activities, and in a moment the village was empty.

A single person remained, hidden in the trees twenty feet from the fire, red eyes glowing like taillights. The forecasted storm had indeed arrived.

For a brief, fleeting instant, Metal Sonic wished he could have run for shelter with the rest of the crowd and be experiencing the companionship about the fire. Immediately he shook his head as if to clear it. Long ago, when Knuckles the echidna and Dr. Robotnik had worked to build him, he had been programmed not only to obey commands, but to feel a degree of liking toward his master. The chip that contained this had made it through both deaths and had long been inactive. He had never cared much for Robotnik, and the only person he had really liked had been the late Packbell. The chip's mate, his 'hate-chip', if you will, was almost always in use.

A raindrop pelted down, then another. Mecha glanced at the stormy sky. It was a spectacular storm, the kind no self-respecting robot wants to be out in. The trees above his head rustled and hissed as the wind tossed them, young leaves tearing free and fluttering down. Lightning shot across the sky, rending the darkness with an instant of heavenly glory. Thunder followed half a second later, rattling every piece of metal in the robot's body. No, no self-respecting robot wanted to be in a thunderstorm at all.

Although no one had ever told him so, he sensed that a storm in the forest was dangerous. Lightning could strike trees, limbs could break in the wind ... there was no refuge for him in Knothole. He would seek shelter elsewhere and return in the morning.

Mecha turned on his heel and began to walk away from the village, paying little attention to the storm-ruckus about him. Finding

Knothole was not as difficult as all that; it was a wonder Robotnik hadn't leveled it years ago. No, he HAD leveled it once, but the Freedom Fighters had escaped and simply rebuilt elsewhere. That Mecha knew its location mattered little. He knew that Robotnik was hiding from Robo Knuckles and could care less about the Freedom Fighters. But, as Mecha was on his own and under no obligation from anyone, he could kill Sonic and anyone else who annoyed him, then go about his business.

Suddenly it began to rain. Huge drops splattered down in a torrent, the sort that all but drowns anyone in its path. Metal Sonic paused for a moment, looked about him, then continued walking. In Robotropolis, he had always been protected from rainstorms, and had little experience with them. He had usually assumed that it would not harm him, as he would have to be submerged to have electrical trouble.

But the wind was directly against him. Water was driven into the cracks in his joints and trickled down the inside of his hull. His system status began to error. He realized that liquid must be seeping in.

At the moment that 'thought' crossed his mind, lightning struck a tree not ten feet from where he stood.

He came on-line sometime afterward, lying in a crumpled heap on his side. A huge list of errors were present and were being fixed or patched as well as his system could. The robot pushed himself to a sitting position and remarked aloud, "Power surge." The tree was now a blasted stump, the fire long since extinguished by the rain. Being metal, he had attracted an off-fling of the bolt and was knocked senseless for a good while.

He dragged himself to his feet, feeling sicker than in his entire existence. The rain had leaked in unchecked while he had been down, and a good inch was sloshing around inside him, wreaking havoc on his system. He MUST have the assistance of a mechanic ... but Packbell was dead, and Robotnik in hiding. He thought of the Freedom Fighters--they had at least one mechanic.

Reluctantly he turned and began to walk toward the village, his circuitry beginning to cook.

\* \* \*

"Hey Sonic, you up?"

Sonic bounded out of bed, pretending to be wider awake than he really was. "Straight up!"

"Well, c'mon then. It's a beautiful morning!"

The light coming through the window of his hut was the clear blue color of dawn. Sonic rubbed his eyes with one hand and strapped on his shoes with the other. He had been sound asleep, although he would never admit it. He had completely forgotten his promise to go hiking with Spark.

A moment later he was up and out the door. Spark was waiting for him, dark eyes bright as the morning. The air was cool and fresh, the

ground underfoot damp and muddy. Puddles stood in every hollow in the ground, reflecting the clear dawn sky. The village lay sleeping about them, clean and rain-washed. Sonic drew a deep, glorious breath, filling his lungs with the intoxicating aroma of water, damp earth and growing things.

"Pretty, ain't it?" Spark commented. He looked at his brother for the first time. "You were asleep, huh?"

Sonic stifled a yawn. "What makes you say that?"

The green hedgehog pointed at the ground. "You put your shoes on the wrong feet."

Sonic sheepishly corrected this, and the two hedgehogs set off into the forest.

"Did you hear the lightning strike a tree last night?" Spark asked. "It'd be cool if we could find it."

Sonic shook his head. "Nope, I was out as soon as I hit the sack. Could you tell where it was?"

Spark shrugged. "It was off this way, I think, and it was pretty close."

The struck one of the numerous paths through the woods and cruised down it, avoiding puddles and stepping over twigs and limbs broken by the storm. The air was drenched in birdsong, and shy flowers peeped here and there from the undergrowth.

"It's gonna be warm today," the green hedgehog remarked, running his silver hand through his forelock.

"Good," Sonic replied. "I'm sick of the cold. I got more than I wanted wandering Mobius like I did ..."

The rounded a bend in the path and stopped short. The area ahead was standing several inches deep in water for twenty feet, and lying face-down in the puddle was Metal Sonic.

Sonic found his tongue first. "What's Mecha doing HERE?" Anger rose in him--his nemesis had no business in the woods this close to Knothole.

Spark felt only pity. He had never hated Mecha very deeply, and the robot had returned the favor. In fact, he could only remember two occasions where Metal Sonic had actually laid hands on him. Spark's real enemy was Robo Knux, whom he disliked with a passion.

The green hedgehog picked up a thick stick and prodded the motionless robot. "Mecha, you in there?"

No reply.

Spark turned to his brother. "Help me drag him out."

Sonic looked at him incredulously. "Are you CRAZY?!? This is Metal Sonic we're talkin' about! He'll probably shock you to death just out of spite!"

"But we can't leave him here!"

"Just watch me." Sonic whirled and began to stalk away.

"Okay," Spark called after him without a trace of irritation in his voice. "I'll get Rotor and Spike to help me ..."

A moment later the two waded into the puddle, seized the robot's wrists and dragged him out of the mud. Sonic's eyes were black and his ears laid flat to his head, enraged. Nevertheless he helped roll Mecha over and drain him. Spark, cradling the robot's upper body in his arms, spoke quietly and rapidly to his brother. "I know what happened last time he was here, but this time there's nobody for him to run to with the village's location. We'll restrain him. Keep him tied up if we have to. But we can't leave him here!"

Mecha was not completely off-line. He had collapsed of system failure, and the only things still operating were his hearing and mental computer, running off his backup batteries. He had heard them approach and recognized both by their voices: Spark and Sonic. He had never really been able to hate Spark--the memory of finding him as a youngster in the streets of the conquered Mobitropolis had seen to that. And now, as Spark fought to have Mecha repaired, Mecha found his 'like-chip' warming up a little. On the other hand, his 'hate-chip' was running full blast--Sonic's sullen attitude grated on the robot's nerves and he hated him more than ever.

Sonic flat-out refused to cooperate and finally walked away very deliberately, fingers in his ears. Spark watched him go with a sigh. He sat back on his heels and let the heavy robot lie flat. "Well Mecha," he said, "looks like it's up to me now. Heck, maybe we should have left you alone." He was thinking of what the other, more experienced Freedom Fighters would say to his bringing in an enemy.

To his surprise the robot's red eyes flicked on and his digital voice replied, "And have me kill you with the rest?"

"I thought you were off-line," Spark said, regaining his composure. "You're not in any condition to do any killing."

"I know it," Mecha said flatly. "I don't dare activate my power core with so much water in my hull. I fully intend to destroy Knothole once I am repaired."

"Why?"

"Because of your brother. I hate him with every microchip I possess."

Spark's attitude became very cool. "We can re-program you, you know. Or if it comes to that, not fix you at all. You ARE our enemy, after all."

"I'll kill you if you don't repair me." It sounded much like the threat of a small child. Spark would have laughed had he not been speaking to Metal Sonic himself.

"How would you do that? You're so full of mud and water you can't

move."

Mecha was silent a long moment. Then he ventured, "If I promise not to kill you, will you see to it I am repaired?"

"Promise not to hurt ANYONE and I'll consider it."

Another long pause. Then with something that sounded very much like regret, the robot said, "Affirmative, then. I will not harm anyone in Knothole."

"No one, period," Spark pressed, seeing a loophole.

"No one at all," Metal Sonic said gruffly. "You have my word."

So it was that Mecha was hauled into the village and placed in Rotor's care. And as before, he was the most controversial addition ever made. The most vocal in the debate was Zephyr, having been robotized at the hands of the robot. She was positively rabid, and she and Sonic together could stir up more trouble than Knothole had ever seen.

Knuckles returned from his bi-weekly trip to the Floating Island and found himself caught in the cross-fire of the 'Mecha war'. He finally made it to Rotor's hut, leaped in and slammed the door, panting. Mecha was lying on the workbench, Rotor stooped over him. They both looked up as the echidna entered. "Hi Knux," Rotor said. "Where you been?"

"In the battlezone," Knuckles replied, leaning wearily against the door. "Everybody I met wanted me to 'help rid Knothole of the robot menace'."

"My reputation has preceded me," Metal Sonic murmured at 1/4th volume.

"Shh," Rotor reprimanded. "I told you not to talk or I'll have to shut you down."

Knuckles stared at the robot. "He's on? But shouldn't he be off if you're working on him?"

Rotor shrugged and said, "Batteries."

"Need an extra hand?"

"All I can get."

"Move over."

\* \* \*

Days passed and spring drew on. The woods leafed out, flowers bloomed profusely, and the muddy ground began to dry out.

It only took a week to repair and clean the robot. Rotor, unknown to anyone, slipped some hardware into Mecha's system while the robot was off-line. These were emotion-chips; things that enabled Metal Sonic to have feelings like pity, joy, love and sorrow. Although the robot's system recognized them and rendered them active, his

'conscious mind' did not and would not until he ran an extensive system scan. He had little time for one of these and so remained ignorant to their presence.

Thus began Mecha's residence with the Freedom Fighters.

After careful thought, he had decided that keeping his word to Spark would be in his own best interest. The village had electricity, running water, security and plenty of useful items he had ready access to, like the scrap-metal in Rotor's yard. He could make his home here and use Knothole as a sort of base. He was quite sure that if he left the Freedom Fighters alone, they would leave him alone.

He was right. Although they treated him with everything from fear to open hatred, they let him go about his business.

Slasher, co-leader of the Freedom Fighters, sat him down a day after he had been up and around. She told him that he could have the run of the village, but if he tried to leave he would be shot and dismantled. He gazed at her for a long moment after she had finished, then said tonelessly, "So I am to be a prisoner?"

"You might call it that," the raptor replied calmly. "You are our enemy, and we can't have you running off to betray us like last time."

Another long silence. Mecha began to have a feeling he detested above all others--feeling stupid. "I have already given Spark my word to harm no one," he said stiffly, red eyes flashing. "Must I give you my word I will not try to escape?"

"A person is only as good as his word," Slasher said, folding her arms across her chest.

"I am not a good person," the robot retorted, "but I will not attempt to escape. May I confide something in you?"

"You wouldn't be the first."

Metal Sonic leaned toward her slightly. "I have nowhere to run. Robo Knuckles will destroy me if he discovers me. It is just as well that I remain here, where he would never look. I am a fugitive."

"So is everyone else here." Slasher stood. "I can't say I trust you--you will have to prove yourself trustworthy. And I suggest you stay away from your rival until he is used to you. He is adamant about throwing you out."

Mecha took up residence with Spark, as he was the only one he was reasonably comfortable with.

"Aren't you afraid you'll wake up with a knife in your gut one of these days?" Sonic asked his brother.

Spark frowned at him. "He likes me, bro. He wouldn't do something like that."

The robot overheard this. He felt a horrible hatred for Sonic, and at the same time, a deep-set liking for Spark.

After a week, life settled into a steady routine for Metal Sonic. Activate himself early in the morning, dutifully clean and oil himself, hang around outside for a while, enter Rotor's workshop and work until noon, take a break, resume work until evening, refuel himself, go back to Spark's hut and shut down for the night. It was the monotonous lifestyle Mecha had always admired. Being a robot, he could set himself a course and follow it throughout the day without thinking.

What he did every day was a mystery. Rotor reported that all he did was weld bits of metal together in lumps, sometimes adding a chemical to the mix. Why he did this, Mecha would not say. He insinuated that he was doing it to keep himself busy, and no amount of pestering could make him explain further. Spark was the only one with enough nerve to pester the robot all, and even he shut up when Mecha told him to.

Gradually everyone got used to the robot, although it was customary to walk around him as if he were a mud puddle. Once they ignored him and went about their lives, Mecha began to watch everyone. Perhaps it was his emotion chips; he was genuinely curious about how Knothole worked from the inside. Everything he saw he kept strictly to himself, as he viewed gossiping as he did females.

He saw how Knuckles would watch Zephyr whenever she was near, an intensely lonesome expression on his face. Yet, whenever they talked, they ended up arguing fiercely and parting ways angry. Only Metal Sonic saw how frustrated Knuckles would be; how he would flee into the privacy of the woods and yell, "Why does this always happen to me? Why can't I talk to her?" Often the robot would trail Zephyr away from these encounters, but he couldn't figure her out. She would be cheerful and happy, and later greet Knuckles as if nothing had happened. Mecha put it down as another intricacy of the feminine mind and gave up trying to understand it.

He saw how his presence affected Sonic's outlook on life. The hedgehog was sulky and unfriendly, but trying to be cordial around the robot. Mecha heard him tell someone, "I can't get over the feeling that he's spying on us! He was before, you know."

Instead of this angering or offending Mecha, it hurt him deeply. He moved away from Sonic, wondering why in the world he felt as he did and wondering suspiciously if he had emotion chips somewhere inside him. He had never felt this way before.

He was still brooding over this when night came and he laid himself down on the table in Spark's hut which served as his bed. He waited until Spark was in bed and the light out, then said, "Claude, your brother hates me."

"Big surprise," Spark replied. "And don't call me 'Claude', please."

"It bothers me."

"So? How many times have you tried to kill him now?"

"Several, I'll admit. But--"

"But what?"

A heavy metallic sigh. "I don't know. Sometimes I wish--oh, never mind."

"He'll hate you as long as you hate him. Give it up. Hating'll kill ya. I know."

A long silence.

Mecha said, "But it's who I am. I wouldn't be me if I didn't hate him!"

"Do you WANT to hate him? Have you ever thought about that?"

Mecha considered. "There WAS a time before I hated him. He made me hate him." His voice took on a defiant tone. "I'll always hate him!"

Spark said nothing, and the robot stared at the square of dim light that was the window. "Hate is a wearisome thing," he observed after a while.

"Can you even say his name?"

"S--Ss--Son--No, I can't. He disgusts me, Spark. I cannot say Sonic in connection with him."

"You did just now."

Another long silence.

"I am weary, Spark. I am shutting down."

The faint lights in the robotic eyes flicked off.

Spark lay on his side, looking at the motionless machine, and murmured, "Poor thing ... poor miserable robot ..."

\* \* \*

The next morning, when Rotor entered his workshop, he found Metal Sonic was already there. The robot was applying a fresh coat of dark blue paint to his left arm.

"What are YOU doing here?" the walrus asked in surprise.

Mecha looked at him coolly. "My finish has been in long need of repainting. Do you mind?"

"No ... I guess not."

The place was no more disorderly than usual, so Rotor decided it wouldn't hurt anything.

Metal Sonic spent all that day hard at work on his lumps of metal. Whatever he was doing, he seemed very intent on it and never spoke. He left his work only once that day, and then because he saw Sonic pass by.

"Hedgehog, detain a moment."

Sonic ground his teeth and slowly turned. Mecha was moving toward him with long strides.

"What do you want?"

"I would like to speak to you in private. I want to--" the robot dropped his eyes. "I want to stop hating. When may we talk?"

Sonic stared at him in disbelief for a moment. "Uh ... I'm going to the river right now ... how about in my hut after dinner tonight?"

"Affirmative."

Sonic watched the robot walk back to Rotor's hut and shook his head. "I'll bet I'm going crazy. Mecha couldn't have said something like that."

\* \* \*

That evening, Mecha approached Sonic's hut and tapped on the door quietly. He waited until Sonic muttered, "Come in," and entered.

The hedgehog was sitting on his bed idly, waiting. He gazed at the robot without expression. Metal Sonic stood before him stiffly. He sensed hostility in his rival's manner and struggled with the hatred that surfaced so easily.

"What did you want?" Sonic asked.

"I want to declare a truce."

"A truce?"

"Yes. Between us. We will no longer be at odds while I am here. It is too much for me to handle--the energy spent hating you is the equivalent I would burn on a hard patrol in Robotropolis. We need to settle our scores without blows."

Sonic could scarcely believe his ears. For Mecha to admit to being tired was one thing, but pushing for non-violence was another." When he looked at the robot again, the red crescents were fixed on the ceiling above them. "Not meaning to change the subject," Mecha Sonic said, "but you have a serious termite problem."

"Yeah." At the moment, the chewed, insect-ridden rafters were farthest from Sonic's mind. "So you're saying that, like, you want to be my friend now?"

"Not friends, exactly," Mecha hedged. "Not at first. But at least not enemies. If will agree, I will delete my foremost anti- hedgehog files."

There was a long silence, and Mecha's sensitive hearing detected several creaks in the roof overhead.

"Mecha," Sonic said uncertainly, pressing his fingertips together, "I

don't hate you, exactly. You scare me. I've seen you do bad things before, and I'm afraid you'll turn on us and hurt someone I love. I'm afraid of you so I hate you. See?"

The robot lifted a hand, then let it fall. "What can I say?" He looked up at the ceiling, then back at Sonic. "I have given Spark my word to harm no one, and Slasher my word I will not try to escape. But I cannot compel you to give me your trust--that is something entirely different. And--"

A sharp crack from the rafters interrupted him. Both of them looked up.

"It does that a lot," Sonic said.

"You need to have this problem fixed," Mecha told him.

"We've been meaning to spray for ages," Sonic commented, standing up, "but--"

One of the beams snapped and shifted noticeably. Sonic jumped.

"That is dangerous," Mecha said calmly. "I suggest we evacuate."

Sonic leaped for the door and brushed against the robot, who stumbled against the wall. That tiny disturbance was all that was needed. With a tremendous crack and clatter of rotten boards the roof of the hut caved in on the hedgehogs, burying them in lumber, thatch and termite-shavings.

The sudden collapse did not go unnoticed by the rest of the village. Within moments villagers and Freedom Fighters alike converged on the hut and began digging away the debris, trying to locate the victims.

Knuckles, digging faster than the rest from his long experience in tunneling, pulled away a piece of thatch and found the top of Mecha's head beneath it. The robot promptly looked up at him; he had been trapped standing.

"I found Mecha!" the echidna shouted to the others, then to the robot, "Where's Sonic?"

"Lying flat at my feet," Mecha replied with exasperating tranquility. "He is alive. I am supporting a beam to prevent it from crushing him. Please hurry--he is panicked and struggling, and may force me to lose my grip."

The group converged on the spot and soon had the debris cleared away. The robot was indeed holding a beam--one of the heavy main studs that surely would have crushed to death the hedgehog beneath it. They lifted it out of Metal Sonic's hands by their combined efforts, revealing Sonic. He was curled in a ball, arms wrapped around his head, scratched and bruised, but otherwise seemingly unhurt. He gasped as their hands touched him, then scrambled out of the rubble by himself. They took him to the medical hut immediately.

Knuckles and Rotor hauled Metal Sonic out of the debris and carried

him to Rotor's workshop. His right leg was twisted out of shape, and his left hand was crushed from the weight of the beam holding it against another. He was told to stay put, and the two left him.

Sonic was pronounced fine, although shaken. The worst of his cuts were bandaged, then the others set about cleaning up the mess his hut had created in the remaining daylight they had left. There was much talk about the disaster and speculation about why Mecha had saved him--after all, didn't they hate each other?

The night passed quietly enough, but when Sonic slept unusually late the next morning, it was found that he had a minor concussion, a major headache and was not feeling sociable. A crowd of well-wishers immediately formed just outside Slasher's hut, where he was staying, and discussed in low tones the incident of the previous evening.

The group was startled by a low, steady voice. "How is Sonic?"

Everyone turned to see Metal Sonic standing there on one leg, his injured leg stretched awkwardly to one side. He had no eye-filter, which left his crescents a plain white. He was dented, dusty and one eye flickered like a neon sign. He had spent the night in the workshop, forgotten. Now, as everyone stared at him in surprise, he repeated his question. "How is Sonic doing? Why is he still in bed? Is he injured?"

One of the bystanders found his tongue and explained the situation. Mecha stood still, eyes downcast, until he finished, then said, "May I see him?" "No, he doesn't want to see anyone."

Suddenly Sonic's voice came from inside the hut. "Mecha can come in."

The robot entered the hut and closed the door behind him. Sonic was lying curled up in Slasher's nest-like bed, arms behind his head. Mecha spoke first. "I wanted to apologize for not catching that board soon enough. I know it hit you--"

"It's all right, Mecha," Sonic said. "Forget it. Hey, I didn't know you were damaged!"

Metal Sonic looked down at his useless leg and twisted hand. "The leg is just a bother," he said, "but the hand is hurtful. I need my hands." He dropped his head so the hedgehog couldn't see his face, moved forward and put his good hand on his rival's shoulder. "I am sorry, Sonic," he murmured. Then he whirled and limped hurriedly from the room.

Sonic stared after him in bewilderment. "Not only did he say my name," he muttered, "he acted precisely as if he were going to cry! This is really weird ..."

The robot was listless all that day, always wandering about, never keeping still. The only time he did not move was when Rotor fastened on his repaired leg. The hand, he said, would take more time to fix. Mecha replied that it was okay, he wouldn't be doing anything for a while anyway.

He was grieving as only a robot unused to feelings can grieve. His whole purpose in life had been to hate and kill Sonic; and yet now, he had succeeded in doing neither. He had protected Sonic instead of letting him die, and seeing him helpless and afraid for the first time had effectively deactivated his hate-chip. He had never seen the hedgehog's weak side--only his angry, defiant, invincible side. He had never wondered if Sonic feared him as one fears death, but now he knew and his emotion-chips were hurting him. He had never experienced compassion for a fellow being, or the self-blame that comes with seeing a friend hurt. A friend? Was that it? Did he view Sonic as a friend? Surely not! But then why did he feel this way, this pain in his artificial soul?

Sonic avoided him like the plague. His was not grief, but guilt. Guilt that he had not befriended the robot sooner, guilt that Mecha, not he, had been the first to try to make amends. And most of all, the disbelief that the robot had saved his life in the accident. This was not helped when Rotor told him that Metal Sonic had requested several files removed from his system--files that proved to contain records of encounters with Sonic. Every angry word Sonic had said had been recorded and saved. There was only one picture file: a photo of the robot himself as he lay torched and dead on the Stardust Speedway. "I do not require these memories any longer," the robot said calmly as Rotor had connected him to Nichole.

"You'll never believe what else he asked me," Rotor told Sonic incredulously. "He asked if I could modify his programming code so as to allow him to appreciate nature. Does that beat all or what?"

"Are you going to?"

"Nah--I'm not much of a programmer. Knux is gonna handle it."

\* \* \*

The sun was setting behind the mountains, washing the sky with green and gold, staining the mare's tails a hot pink. The forest was a deep grey-green, the evening relaxing in the evening hush. The lake reflected the mountains and sky, upsidedown and brilliant in the depths.

Sonic and Serena sat side by side on a large rock, watching the sun's fiery crescent sink beyond the hills in silent admiration. The air was cool, but not uncomfortable.

The sun finally slipped from sight, but the sky remained swirled with blue and pink. Sonic murmured, "I wonder how it looks to a robot?"

"I'm not one, so don't ask me," Serena replied placidly, resting her head on her brother's shoulder. "Probably like a picture on a computer screen."

A long silence followed. The colors in the heavens began to fade, the higher clouds retaining their splendor. Sonic stretched out his legs and leaned back contentedly, making Serena sit up. "You know," he said to his sister, "Mecha's pretty decent when he's not trying to replace me."

"I know. It's getting to where I'm not scared of him anymore."

A figure standing just within earshot, hidden by the brush on the lakeshore, felt a feeling of gladness stir his robot heart. He, too, was watching the sunset and deriving the pure, simple pleasure of witnessing beauty. The few lines of code Knuckles had written for him were working wonders.

Eavesdropping was a bad habit Mecha had retained from spy missions in Robotropolis, but for once he was happy with what he had overheard. Sonic did not hate him, and was even thinking of him kindly. In a moment Mecha would approach the two and walk with them back to the village, enjoying the companionship of friends. Later he would go to Spark's hut and shut down without worrying about keeping his murder-lust under control. No, he had no desire to harm Sonic now.

But for the moment, the sunset had not yet faded from the sky. He would not yet show himself. He would continue to entertain this new-found love of nature.

Mecha, for the first time in his existence, was happy.

\* \* \*

> <div class="center">The Mecha Trilogy<p> Story two: In which Mecha breaks a promise and saves a life<p>

---

"There is a hurricane approaching," Metal Sonic announced unexpectedly.

A number of Freedom Fighters were grouped in the community hut, engaged in various activities. Sonic and Tails were seated on the floor by the fire, a game of checkers in progress before them. Knuckles was typing away on a laptop computer on his knees, seated with his back against the hearth. Serena, Zephyr and Sally were working on a sewing project in the corner, and Spark and Mecha were engaged in a fierce game of chess.

The robot's announcement had fallen on a brief period of silence in the room, and was heard by all. Everyone looked up. "How do you know?" Sonic called, taking the opportunity to double-jump two of Tails's pieces.

"I established communication with the Riverbase weather satellite today," Metal Sonic replied. To Spark he said, "Check." To the others, "A low-pressure system just off the coast has winds exceeding seventy-five miles an hour, making it an official hurricane." The scarlet eyes turned in Knuckles's direction. The echidna had frozen at the word 'hurricane' and was staring at the robot expressionlessly. "It will hit the coast sometime tomorrow, Knuckles. I thought you might like to know, in light of the Floating Island."

Knux sat still a moment longer, then deliberately shut down the computer, snapped the screen shut and set it on the brick beside him.

"Sal," he said, "I'm taking my furlough early, hope you don't mind."

Sally shook her head. "Of course not! Go right ahead and take as long as you need."

"See ya, Knux," Sonic waved as the echidna rose as headed for the door. The rest of the group repeated the gesture, except for Metal Sonic, who was staring at the chessboard in disbelief as Spark took his queen.

No one paid much attention when Zephyr climbed to her feet and padded quietly after Knuckles. Mecha noticed her as she passed and cocked a hearing sensor in her direction without shifting his gaze from the chessboard. Thus he overheard a conversation he would have call to remember later.

Knuckles had paused just outside the door to don his windbreaker--a strong gale was rocking the forest, driving clouds across the starry sky. He recognized it as the herald of the coming storm.

As he buttoned his jacket, mind on his island, Zephyr stepped out the door and stood behind him. "Knux ..."

He turned. "Hi, Zeff. Look, I gotta go ..."

She nodded. "How long will you be gone?"

He shrugged, trying to swallow down the joy that she was speaking cordially to him of her own accord. "A week, maybe two. Depends on how bad the storm damage is."

"Will you be--I mean, you'll be safe, right?"

He looked at her steadily. "This is a hurricane, Zephyr. Hurricanes are dangerous. I'll be doing everything in my power to protect the Floating Island, and if it means danger to myself, then so be it."

She didn't appear to like that, but all she did was look down and say, "Be careful, Knux." She stood on the doorstep and watched him trot from sight, and waited until she saw the white flash the teleported created. Then she re-entered the hut and returned to her former activities, but with depression evident in her every move. Mecha had heard every word and seen her face, and said nothing. It was none of his business, but it bore watching.

\* \* \*

The following day was a flurry of preparation for the approaching storm. Several of the Freedom Fighters protested, saying that they were going by the word of a robot who was known to be a liar. Sally, who had some doubts of her own, succeeded in linking Nichole to the weather satellite, and received photos and information on the approaching hurricane. It looked to be quite a storm--a round white disk with a black hole in the center, like a galaxy. Doubts were assuaged, and work was begun again with renewed vigor.

Mecha worked with the rest, fastening shutters, nailing up boards, patching roofs and carting all small objects indoors. Whenever he did

work such as this, the village's opinion of him rose considerably. He was contributing to the welfare of Knothole, so maybe he wasn't as bad as he looked.

No one was concerned about Knuckles but Zephyr. She tried not to show her worry, but it was apparent in the way she looked and moved. Once she asked Sally if the storm had hit the Floating Island. Sally replied that yes, it was probably already right in the teeth of it. After that the echidna was so distracted she was of little help anywhere. Metal Sonic watched her like a robot hawk. Until now, she had acted as if Knuckles was one notch below pond scum, and had in general been a jerk toward him. But now ... something told Mecha to keep an eye on her at all times.

Night brought a heavy cloudbank out of the west. The air became humid and threatening. Spark lay in his bed with the covers thrown back, spread-eagled and sweating. Mecha paced from one window to another restlessly, peering out. The heat was getting to him as well. "It will get worse," he assured Spark, clasping his hands behind his back. "The humidity will increase to 100 percent once it begins to rain."

"Great," Spark panted, wiping sweat from his face with the sheet. "Won't there be wind?"

"Yes, but it won't help." The robot's red eyes focused on something outside the window. He watched it for a moment, then said, "I fear the humidity is condensing in my hardware. Do you mind if I step over to Rotor's and dry myself?"

"I don't care," Spark said. "You might as well spend the night there. No use coming back once the storm hits."

"Affirmative." Mecha stepped to the door, paused and said, "Goodbye, Spark." Then he was gone.

His ability to lie through his teeth came naturally. He had lied so much in his existence that it was almost easier to lie than to speak truthfully. He had waterproofed himself weeks ago; his internal hardware was as dry as a bone. In reality, he had seen a certain echidna sneak by in the darkness, and she was not out for an evening stroll. He had been waiting for her to do such a thing all day, and had no intention of letting her slip away unaccompanied.

Mecha made his way through the silent village, trailing Zephyr easily with his radar. The night was as black as pitch, and it was with difficulty he could see his own hand before his face. Occasionally there was a flicker of lightning and a low threat of thunder, but it had not yet reached the village.

"She is a fool," Mecha thought as she ducked onto the trail that led to Knuckles's teleporter. "Doesn't she know what the island will be like tonight?"

He hesitated at the beginning of the trail. He had given his word to Slasher not to leave the village. But wouldn't the promise allow for the protection of a fool-hardy girl? After all, he had given his word in the sense that he would not run away and join forces with his old cronies. And yet, he had promised \_not to leave at all\_...

He made his decision in an instant. With a sound like a moan of pain, he continued after Zephyer.

The robot watched from a distance as she activated the teleporter and stepped onto the crystal lens. The brilliant beam appeared, surrounding her, silhouetting her weirdly in its midst; then she vanished. Mecha leaped from the brush and dove into the light before it could fade and was also teleported away.

The wind hit him like an express train and nearly bowled him over. Good grief, was this the Floating Island? He had never felt wind like this before--it was like a wall and carried rain, leaves, branches and other debris. The air was not cold, but the wind and rain were so strong it was impossible to feel the temperature. He braced himself and leaned far into the wind, searching for Zephyer. He finally located her--more than thirty feet away and struggling into the storm. The idiot! He must catch her and get her to safety. It was more dangerous out here than he had thought.

He took one step into the wind. His engines revved unexpectedly, lifting him into the air and dashing him to the earth. Confused, he scrambled to his feet, fighting the wind. What in the world ...? He faced the wind and again moved into it. This time he realized that the force of the gale was actually turning the fan blades in his engine intake, forcing his engines to kick on.

After a few more tumbles he was able to use this to his advantage. He turned on the water filter in his jets, as a cup of rain entered his intake every sixty seconds. Then, surfing the storm, he set out after Zephyer.

She had travelled quite a distance already, plugging away with grim determination through the dark and storm. As Mecha strove to catch up to his quarry, he swept the landscape with his scanners. They must take cover somewhere. His computer reported that they were in the large flatland where Marble Gardens touched Sandopolis. The island was turned to the desert was bearing the brunt of the storm. Knuckles was a wise guardian--he would take less damage that way. But it also meant that Mecha and Zephyer were exposed to the full fury of the hurricane.

The robot detected the foot of the island's mountains half a mile away. Perhaps they could find shelter in a ravine or behind a rock outcropping.

He hurried to reach Zephyer, his body shuddering from the wind's force and rain playing a tune on his metallic hull. She was flesh and bone--she must be totally exhausted. His infra-red sight sensors made her out, bent and struggling against the wind. He skidded across the slippery ground and up to her. He called her name, at the same time laying hold of her shoulder.

Perhaps it was a frightened reaction. She did not appear frightened, but rather outraged. She whirled and drove her metal-clad fist into his face three times, then kicked him viciously as he fell. The jarring impact of his blows reset the internal computer that controlled his motion ability. Mecha was forced to lie where he had fallen, staring helplessly after her as she fled from him. Once the computer came on-line, it demanded a system-check before it would allow him to move. Cursing the program, he did as it wished, unable

to override it. It was a full half hour before he again rose to his feet, covered with mud and filled with disgust. If she tried that again, he would stun her.

His scans of the countryside detected no life whatsoever. She must be beyond his range by now. Increasingly irritated, he launched himself into the hurricane to find her.

Ah hour passed, then another. Mecha fought the wind, executing a sort of bizarre mid-air dance a foot from the ground, zig-zagging all over the area but finding no one. Where had she gone? There was no way she could have travelled more than a mile in this tempest. The robot began to really worry, something else his emotion chips had enabled him to do. At one moment he hated Zephyr with a passion for being stupid enough to go out into this. At the next he was sick with apprehension that something may have happened to her. If so, then he had broken his word to Slasher for no good reason.

He was on the verge of giving up when he scanner picked up a life-form on the furthest limits of its sweep. He made for it with all the speed he could muster, which wasn't much against the storm. He saw that the blip was in the foothills, and it was not moving at all. Perhaps she had holed up somewhere.

Mecha located the echidna after a mad search over a wind-scorched hillside. Zephyr was lying on the ground with her back to the gale, eyes closed. The robot knelt beside her, the wind nearly knocking him down. She had collapsed of total exhaustion and was in some kind of sleep. She was in danger of death by exposure.

The robot sheltered her unprotected head with his body and arms while sending his most powerful radar beam about the area. There must be somewhere to take shelter nearby--he would not be able to carry her far in this. To his utmost relief, he discovered a cave not far up the hillside. He scooped up Zephyr in his arms and staggered up toward it.

The cave was one of the many dug by guardians of the past. It had a narrow entrance, but opened up into a good-sized cavern a little ways in. Mecha stumbled in, flicked on the headlight in his forehead and gently laid Zephyr on the earthy floor. It was a relief to be out of the wind and rain, to hear silence instead of the roar and scream of the wind past his ears--

A glance around showed that there was a small tunnel at the rear of the cave, leading away into darkness. Mecha ignored it; ten to one it led nowhere. He ran a brief system check and found his fuel level dangerously low. Great. He had better recharge his battery pack with the remainder or he would never make it back to Knothole.

"Hello-o-o ..."

Mecha's head snapped up. Someone was calling from far back in the other tunnel. They sounded miles away. "Hello!" he shouted at maximum volume. His hearing detected footsteps coming in his direction. After a moment he saw the beam of a flashlight. A figure stepped into the cavern and stopped. It was Knuckles, his dreadlocks held away from his face with a bandanna. "Mecha!" he exclaimed in surprise. "What are YOU doing here?"

"Rescuing a fool," the robot replied, training his headlight on the motionless body beside him.

Knuckles gazed at her without expression for a moment, then suddenly recognized her. His eyes widened, and he gave a groan that came from deep inside him. He knelt beside her and rolled her over with great tenderness. He found her to be alive, but very weary and soaking wet. Knuckles reared up and yelled down the tunnel, "Vector, Mighty, bring me some towels and blankets, pronto! And I mean NOW!!" Mecha, who for some reason was alert for such things, detected a tremor in the echidna's voice and a fearful look on his face. It was no surprise when he turned on the robot and demanded, "How did she get like this?"

Mecha told him, taking no pains to show anything but disdain for Zephyr.

"Yes," Knuckles said when Mecha had finished. "She is a fool. I'm sorry she put you out like this."

"Yet you heartily approve of her," the robot replied with his uncanny discernment. "That she would care enough about you to--"

"Hey Knux!" It was Vector the crocodile and Mighty the armadillo, both carrying an armful of towels and blankets. They stopped and stared at Mecha, Knuckles and the prostrate Zephyr. "What the heck ...?" Vector asked, dumbfounded.

"Gimme the stuff and all questions must be submitted in writing," Knuckles said irritably, rising and snatching the supplies from their hands and returning to Zephyr's side. As an afterthought he tossed a towel to either of them and commanded, "Here, dry off Mecha."

Metal Sonic surrendered himself to the vigorous drying session, but did not remove his eyes from Knuckles. He had never imagined that the burly echidna was capable of such gentleness, of the patience to wipe down Zephyr's metal body and wrap her in blankets. Because of his watching, he saw Knuckles press his lips to Zephyr's de-robotized hand for a second when Vector and Mighty were not looking. "He really does care for her," the robot concluded internally. "And she for him. I sincerely hope I do not ever fall in love. It's disgusting."

Now shining and mostly dry, Mecha pulled away from his assailants and protested, "You are scrubbing my paint off! I am sufficiently dry."

"Don't wantcha t' rust," Mighty said with a grin.

"If you want to help me," the robot replied dryly, "bring me a gallon of liquid fuel, premium unleaded."

To his surprise, Knuckles said, "Go get him some out of the generator's reservoir. Oh, and tell Espio and Charmy we're setting up camp here instead of the east cavern, too."

"You sure, boss?" Vector asked, as taken aback as Mecha Sonic.

If looks could kill, the crocodile would have been incinerated on the spot. Knuckles appeared to be developing an extremely bad mood. "I'm

sure," he snarled, eyes snapping. "Get lost!"

The armadillo and crocodile fled, muttering, "What's with HIM?"

Knuckles scowled after them until their footsteps had faded into the distance, then returned his worried gaze to Zephyr. She was wrapped in a cocoon of blankets, her head cradled in his arms. A fine shivering had possessed her, and her breathing was swift and uneven. Her face was flushed. Knux looked at the robot, who was watching him without a sound. "What's the matter with her?" His voice was husky with feeling.

Mecha scanned her critically. "Shock," he said simply. "Stress coupled with the strenuous activities and exposure of this evening. She is not very strong. Even Slasher would feel ill effects under the same circumstances."

Knuckles looked at him for a long moment, then hugged Zephyr's head to his chest with a moan. "She won't die?" he asked after an interval.

"I don't think so," the robot replied.

"I lost her once," Knuckles said quietly, bitterly. "I'm not losing her again."

"You're not going to kiss her, are you?" Mecha asked.

Knuckles gave him an odd look. "Who said anything about that?"

"No one. But this is the part where the male kisses the female and she comes to and says she loves him. If you are going to proceed, I will shut myself down so as to avoid it." The distaste was apparent in his voice.

"Get outta here," Knuckles said. "I'm too worried about her surviving right now to do something like that."

After a moment of loud silence, Zephyr stirred and opened her eyes. "Knux?" she whispered, looking up at him, then around the dark cave. "Where are we?"

"A cave," Knuckles replied, his voice queer with emotion. "Mecha brought you here."

She twisted around, looking for the robot. Her eyes fell on him, sitting hunched up on the floor, watching. "Thanks, and sorry," she murmured.

"You're welcome," Mecha replied automatically.

Zephyr struggled to sit up and Knuckles helped her. She crouched on the cold floor and wrapped the blankets closer about herself, shivering. Something in her manner showed her shame.

"What are you doing here, anyway?" Knuckles demanded, suddenly sounding very angry. "Don't you know you could have been killed out there?"

"I know," she gulped, staring at the floor. "I know it was dumb. I realized it as soon as I felt the wind."

When she said no more, Knuckles demanded, "Why? Why did you come out here?"

After a long pause she lifted her head and looked at him. "I was afraid ... afraid you would get hurt."

Knuckles felt a jumble of feelings leap for his throat, trying to make it from his heart to his head. The first one to materialize as a coherent thought was, "She risked her life to make sure I was safe!" He was nearly overcome. Masking his intensity of feeling behind a show of sullen anger, he growled, "Well, I have no intention of getting hurt. I drive the island from Hidden Palace. Now I'm going to have to look after you along with the island." Mecha noticed he kept his eyes on the floor, possibly because they would betray him.

Zephyr did not see this. "I know!" she wailed. "I never should have come!" Apparently she meant it in a broader sense, for she glared at Mecha and said, "You were the one who brought me to Mobius in the first place!"

"Leave me out of this, please," he replied politely. "I'm not the one who came here out of worship of Knuckles, who is now crazy about you."

Startled, the two looked at each other, but before either could speak Espio, Charmy, Vector and Mighty walked in, each carrying stuff like sleeping bags, lanterns, a big crate with various foodstuffs in it, a couple of folding chairs and a boom-box. "Hey look, Zeff's up!" Vector exclaimed, setting down his armload. He walked over to her and shook her hand. "Hi, I'm Vector, that's Espio, that's Charmy and that's Mighty."

"Hi," she replied faintly. She had never met the Chaotix.

"Oh yeah," said Mighty, who was carrying the greatest load with ease. He also had a plastic gallon jug under one arm, which he carried over to Mecha. "Here's your fuel," he said, setting it down beside him.

"Thank you," Mecha said, his red eyes suddenly brightening. He unscrewed the top, pulled a small tube from his side and fed it in, his movements quick and sure. He gave no sigh he was paying attention to the activities going on around him. For a robot, he was a good actor.

The Chaotix and Knuckles were arranging the gear in an orderly fashion about the cave--pitching tents, unrolling sleeping bags, stacking duffel bags. Knuckles had one particular object set up in a corner of the cave; a portable teleporter. It was a cloudy blue lens on a flat stand with four sharp metal arms that clamped into the ground for stability. The echidna was in the midst of installing when he said, "Zeff, I can't leave the island long enough to take you back to Knothole. You must stay here until the storm is over and I can spare a hand. In the meantime, you and Mecha will work to earn your keep. As guardian, I have the right to throw you out and let you starve." He turned and looked straight at her. "Understand?"

She nodded meekly.

Mecha replied, "Yessir," but inwardly added, "like you'll make her work. If anything, I will be the one whom you use as a packhorse. Oh well. That it what comes of breaking my word to Slasher."

But he was wrong. For the next two days (the duration of the storm), Knuckles drove them all with a stern ferocity none dared question or resist. "I hate it when he gets like this," Charmy confided to Zephyr as she carried supplies from one cavern to another. "He's impossible! The reason is, he's so focused on fighting the hurricane he can't think of much else. He'll get over it once the storm breaks."

The storm indeed broke, but Knuckles's black mood did not. In his eyes, the little damage the island had sustained was magnified fourfold. He worked with a passion in the humid calm and mud the hurricane had left behind. Mecha was spared this particular labor, as mud was entirely different than rain. Zephyr pitched in and worked like a trouser, but after the first day her legs and robot hand were so full of grit she could hardly move. Determined to make up for her unwanted presence on the island, she remained in the cave and prepared meals for the hard-working Chaotix. Her popularity immediately went up several notches. She was not a bad cook, and housework suited her better than manual labor. She was not alone--Mecha stayed with her, as all outdoors was a sea of muddy water and he was loath to venture out. At first she resented his presence; after all, if he had not robotized her, she would be able to help out on the island. But after she had grown accustomed to his quiet, red-eyed presence, he apologized for his deed.

"I robotized you out of cruelty," he said to her tonelessly one morning after the Chaotix and Knux had departed. "I saw you as a hindrance to my operation, and you annoyed me. I am sorry now, however."

"Yeah," she said as she pulled her dreadlocks back and fastened them with a rubberband. "I can't go out in the mud like this." She set about tidying up the cave. Mecha seated himself on a rock and watched her. "You know," he remarked, "they prefer it if you remain here and 'hold down the fort', as they say."

She tossed him a glance over her shoulder from the tub where she was scrubbing dishes. "You're kidding me. I feel like a total wimp, staying up here while they go out and cut trees and haul rocks."

"The work you do here is as important as what they do out there," the robot replied evenly. "You are maintaining a home for them. Something for them to look forward to when they return from extended labor. It seems to me that a hot meal is more important to them than you realize. You are deeply appreciated, and they will miss you when you leave."

She turned and faced him, drying a plate with a dishtowel. "Why don't they ever tell me? How do I know they're appreciating me and not just taking me for granted?"

Mecha was silent for a moment, then said, "Watch how their eyes light

up when they walk in and see how orderly things are and smell their supper cooking. Observe how much they eat. Males are generally not very articulate about appreciation. Being one, I know. They show it in their actions." He paused, then said regretfully, "But I have never actually experienced these things. I am only a machine that observes how you act among yourselves." He drew up his knees, folded his arms and rested his chin on them.

No more was said for a while. Zephyr had a new thought to ponder as she worked: was it possible that Mecha disliked being a robot? How could he? It would be the same as her becoming unhappy because she was an echidna. Or was it? Being robotized was not the same as being a real robot ... she could feel, and eat, and smell ... things a robot could never do nor understand. She also had the option of being de-robotized whenever she wanted. (She kept putting it off, for her robot shell was a comfort on cold days and protected her like armor. Not to mention she would lose the laser pistol in her left arm, which was useful for small things. [She had lost the sword in her right arm when she had had her hand de-robotized.]) But Mecha could not be de-robotized; his entire personality was carried in the hardware in his head and torso.

The robot was right about one thing: the Chaotix and Knuckles were very appreciative of lunch and dinner without saying much to that effect. Now that Zephyr knew what to look for, she sensed their gratitude and cheered up. Mecha said nothing, but once met her eyes in such a way as to say, "I told you so."

That evening Knuckles informed them that the majority of the work had been completed, and the two could be sent home the following day. His attitude had relaxed considerably with the work and Zephyr's food, and he was quite sociable again. The main reason for his moodiness had been that he did not like the thought of Zephyr doing a man's work. Having her stay in camp pleased him, for some reason. He was also glad that she had made up with Mecha, as the robot had made a change for the better and was genuinely sorry for what he had done.

\* \* \*

Teleporting back to Knothole was no big deal--Mecha and Zephyr had done it alone before, and arrived unscathed. Knuckles had radioed in the first day to let the villagers know that the two were with him and not to worry, so their reception was casual. Zephyr went about with her head high and a firm step--she had pleased Knux and that was all that mattered. But Mecha, for a time, was treated with renewed suspicion. He had broken one of the two promises he had made; would he break the other and turn on Knothole?

To say this made him sad would be putting it lightly. Every sidelong glance and whisper cut straight to his robot heart like a whiplash. He knew he would have to explain himself to Slasher, and so sought her out before much time had elapsed.

He explained why he had left the village, and how he had saved Zephyr's life, then begged pardon. "The sense of the thing was that I not depart to betray you, correct?" he asked of the big raptor, who was listening impassively, arms folded. "And if I had not, she would have perished." He bowed his indigo head and stared at the ground, metal hands clasped before him. "You may imprison me, bind me in

chains if you like. I fully deserve any punishment you deem suitable." He remained in this position, awaiting her verdict.

Slasher gazed at him thoughtfully. Humbleness was an attribute she had never attributed to Mecha, and yet here he was, begging forgiveness. She considered for a long moment, then said, "You did indeed break your word about not leaving the village. Under any other circumstances you should not have left. But because you were acting in the best interest of another and not your own--" Mecha lifted his head and looked at her "--you are pardoned. But only this once. If something of this sort happens again, tell me or Sally." Her voice took on an exasperated tone. "Your voice is a serious thing, Mecha. Breaking your word is like violating a written contract. This has hurt your reputation, no matter if it was for a good cause. You will never be trusted to the same degree again."

The robot stood silently for a moment, gazing into her cool green eyes. Then he said softly, "Oh, don't I know it? ... Thank you, Slasher." He turned and walked away into the village, head down and shoulders drooping.

"I hate having to reprove him," Slasher murmured, watching him depart. "It's like whipping a dog ... he knew he was wrong ... unfortunately, so does everyone else."

No one knew how soon Mecha's second promise was to be severely tested.

\* \* \*

> <div class="center">The Mecha Trilogy<p> Story three: The  
Test<p>

—

Cool blue evening. Mecha stood at his post in the forest, red eyes casting a faint glow around his head and reflecting in his polished muzzle. He took his guard duty very seriously; with each night he guarded Knothole he was proving he could be trusted. He was eager to receive the goodwill of the village; already the whispers and nasty rumors behind his back had ceased, and aside from a sidelong look once in a while, he was generally ignored.

It was quiet. Above the trees the sky was a deep cornflower blue, shading to burnt orange in the west. The evening star shown there, clear and bright like a huge jewel. Mecha leaned against a tree and crossed his legs. How different this was from Robotropolis! He had done his sentry duty as a matter of course, assuming it was one of those things he had been built to perform and never question. But here he had a reason. He was allowing once more Freedom Fighter to sleep that night; he was proving himself trustworthy; not to mention he was able to observe a night in the woods, something he enjoyed for some unknown reason.

An hour passed and dusk deepened into night. The robot sat down at the foot of a tree and idled his most active systems, shutting off the light in his eyes. No use burning expensive fuel doing nothing.

Somewhere around 8:00 PM, his ever-alert hearing sensors caught the sound of someone approaching. He immediately came fully on-line and stood. He watched and listened, trying to guess who it was. Heavy determined footfalls. Strange, they sounded almost metallic. After a moment the figure came around a bend in the trail and stopped. It's eyes were glowing green crescents.

Instantly Mecha forgot himself and shot his scanner almost maliciously over Robo Knux's frame. The other robot's system was set to 'normal', not 'warfare'. Perhaps he came in peace. Mecha kept a scan on him anyway, knowing that R.K.'s settings could go from normal to war in the space of one second.

Robo Knux knew Mecha was scanning him. He stood patiently until he was finished, then lifted a heavy, clawed hand. "Greetings, Mecha bot two."

Mecha ignored the salute. "What are you doing here?"

"Scoping out the area." Robo Knux turned and motioned off into the forest. "I seem to have stumbled across the infamous Knothole village."

Metal Sonic bristled inwardly but said nothing.

R.K turned back, green eyes narrowed. "Hove you actually JOINED them?" His voice took on a pitying tone. "Poor Metal Sonic! They must have reprogrammed you. How else could you have stooped to defecting?"

"Well, you know the saying," Mecha said, a little too jovially. "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em."

Robo Knux's scans showed that Mecha was in full-blown war mode and his self control might go at any moment. R.K was not looking for a battle that evening, and decided to change his tune. "How goes it since I departed? I have not been to the Great Forest in many months."

"Quiet," Mecha replied stiffly. "What ARE you doing here?"

If Mecha was an accomplished liar, then Robo Knux was a professional. "Looking for you," he said sweetly. "I have seen hide nor hair of you since last summer. The time alone has given me time to think. You are the only robot capable of matching my strength and intellect. If we were to join forces, we could form an invincible team and stamp out all resistance. We ARE brothers, after all."

"That is very kind of you," Metal Sonic replied lucidly. "But we are rivals, not brothers. I could never assist you for you try to master me and I will NOT be mastered." He was calmer now, his anger level sinking back into the green.

Robo Knux allowed a tinge of annoyance to creep into his voice. "Well then, if you will not join me, I must not allow my visit to go undetected. I will raze Knothole to the ground."

"Why?" There was sheetrock and ice in Mecha's tone.

R.K shrugged. "It is what I was designed to do. I long to do it. To kill--" he checked himself, for Mecha's eyes had brightened to 200 watts, and it was not in excitement.

"I will give you a choice," the crimson robot said to the indigo one. "Join me now. If not, I will appear at sunset tomorrow and destroy the Freedom Fighters. Tell anyone of this and I will appear at that moment in full battle array."

There was a long silence. Mecha's eyes glittered and sparkled, something he only allowed them to do when he was so angry he was in danger of spontaneously combusting. "I will give you my answer when you enter the village tomorrow," he said so softly R.K could just hear him.

"Very well," Robo Knux replied. "See you then." He turned and clanked away, but in triumph. Mecha had just set himself up to be massacred.

As he departed, a deathly fear fell upon Mecha. If he defected back to Robo Knux's side, he would betray all the Freedom Fighters into his hands--the very thing he had sworn not to do. He could not do that. It was with them he had learned to care for others and how not to hate. He had learned real respect for authority--not just because he was programmed to. He had learned what real friendship was like. No, he could not go back to his old life. Emotions made him soft--what of it? Feelings were wonderful things. Robo Knux had none.

But if he did not go with his enemy, what would become of Knothole? In the abstract circuits that passed as his imagination (it was very limited), he saw everything torched and burning, the villagers dying like flies as Robo Knuckles shot them--the screams-- and most horrible of all, the eyes turned to him in dying entreaty, pleading for help. No! He could not let it happen! He would fight to the death first--Wait. Was that the real reason behind Robo Knux's appearance? Did he want to kill Mecha so badly he was willing to blackmail him? Yes, R.K would do anything for a good fight, no matter how low.

Mecha passed the rest of the night in an agony of terror and indecision.

\* \* \*

He told no one of Robo Knux's threat. He had never experienced prolonged fear before, and it did something strange to his circuitry--it did not short out, but slowly burned itself black inside his hull. As a result the robot was something very much like sick. Often he would just sit and stare at nothing, his computer mind blank.

Shortly before sunset, he beckoned to Spark and took him aside. "What's up?" the green hedgehog inquired.

"I wanted to bid you farewell," Mecha said, staring at the ground dully. "Please forgive me for any damage."

"Damage?" Spark exclaimed. "Are you going on a rampage or something?"

"No," the robot replied. "I am going to die. Violently. I cannot tell you what will happen or where, but please make sure everyone is under shelter and armed by sunset." He turned and gazed into the west.

Spark stared at him. "You're kidding, right?"

"No." The resignation in the robot's voice was confirmation enough.

"I don't ... know what to say, Mecha."

"Then don't." Mecha turned to Spark suddenly, eyes so dim they were hardly visible. "Please, my good friend and roommate, go alert the village now. It is nearly time." He turned and trotted toward the center of the village.

Spark headed for Slasher.

As the sun dipped beyond the distant mountains, Robo Knuckles flew into the village like a red Gorgon. Mecha, eyes flaming, rose to meet him.

They clashed in the air and tumbled to the ground. Both regained their feet at once and faced each other. "So your answer is 'no'," Robo Knux laughed. "I thought as much."

"I will fall before you harm the village, fiend," Mecha said calmly. His fear was gone. It had been replaced by the personality of the robot he had been; cold, ruthless, cunning. He saw no one but his opponent. His surroundings had ceased to exist. One of them must fall there, and it would not be him.

One moment the crimson robot was motionless. The next he flung himself at Mecha with a fierce digital cry, arms swinging. Mecha blocked the first two blows, but Robo Knux kicked his feet out from under him and he went down. He went down fighting like a caged wolverine. Somehow he fought himself out from under his opponent and regained his feet. He did not realize he was already damaged. Each of Robo Knux's fists bore two eight-inch knuclaws that punched through Mecha's hull like a nail through an aluminum can. Mecha's right arm had a hole clean through it, leaving the wiring exposed. The top of his head had six holes punched in it, and one of them was leaking black oil. He neither noticed nor cared.

One of Robo Knux's eyes was cracked and his red chest dented, but he was largely unhurt. He gave a triumphant laugh. "You are a fool, Metal Sonic! I will rip you limb from limb!" He charged again, and Mecha met him squarely.

Both robots preferred hand-to-hand combat, but each had a respectable amount of weaponry. Robo Knux had several toys he had installed recently, but had decided that Mecha must shoot first. After all, he could tear him apart without shooting.

Knothole village was deathly silent. Everyone had taken a weapon and were concealed in the woods, watching from behind rocks and trees. Slasher alone remained in the open, a large blaster cannon cradled in her arms, looking for an opening to add her two cents to the fight.

Several times she lifted it to her shoulder, but always the robots had moved, so she would have hit Mecha instead.

Then Mecha scored his first and only real hit. There was a tiny missile, the size of a dart, mounted in one shoulder for emergencies. He launched it at his enemy. Robo Knux threw up an arm to shield himself. The missile detonated on it, blowing his arm off just below the elbow and flinging him down. Metal fragments fluttered to the ground all around as he lunged to his feet, angry for the first time. "Cheater!" he bellowed. "Tired of hand-to-hand, eh? How about a taste of your own medicine?" As he spoke, the panels on his shoulders and chest opened, revealing an impressive arsenal. Mecha said nothing, but set his shields on full charge.

The following firestorm was terrible to see. Robo Knux clobbered Mecha with everything he had, not caring particularly if he missed and wreaked havoc on the surrounding village. Mecha's shields withstood the barrage of heavy lasers and rockets, but about the time they failed, Robo Knux brought out his napalm cannon.

The wave of chemical flame engulfed the blue robot, setting fire to the grass in a wide circle around him. Robo Knux only fired twice, then stood and watched his enemy. He was reluctant to kill Mecha very soon; he was relishing the battle, even if he HAD lost an arm in the process.

Mecha's heat levels maxed out at once. In silent torture he leaped out of the fire, then threw himself to the ground and rolled around. Robo Knux laughed in evil hilarity, then opened another panel on his intact arm and sprayed Mecha with white foam, extinguishing the fire. "Poor little robot!" he admonished as Metal Sonic climbed to his feet. "You shouldn't play with burning napalm! It might hurt you!"

Mecha was a sight. The heat had seared off his paint in patches, and in other places his hull had melted and bubbled. His cooling fans were whirring full blast, and foam ran down his head, shoulders and legs. "I am not whipped yet," he said dryly.

"Oh, you're not, eh?" Robo Knux taunted. "I guess I'll just have to finish you off by hand!"

Hand. Mecha's blurred vision sensors flew to Robo Knux's missing limb--a gaping hole, exposed wires sparking a little. If he were to be submerged in water--

He whirled and pelted toward the path that led to the river. "Ooo, chicken!" his enemy shouted after him.

Mecha turned his head and retorted, "Are you scared to come after me?"

"You're already so damaged it's no contest!" R.K yelled as he revved his engines and gave chase.

Neither noticed, but Slasher bounded into the air and followed them. Spark leaped out of hiding, his gun held high. "What are you DOING?" Sonic hissed from nearby. "Mecha's gonna need help!" the hedgehog shot back, his voice unsteady with the helpless rage of seeing a friend and roommate beaten unmercifully. He tore away after the

robots without another word.

Metal Sonic never knew how he got to the river. One moment he was running into the woods, the next he was skidding to a stop on the wide sandy beach. His computers were not working properly anymore. His only thought was, "I must get him in the water ..."

Robo Knux knew what his opponent was up to as soon as he caught sight of the river. "You would DROWN me?" he shrieked in outrage. "Why you--" here he proceeded to call Mecha several names he had learned in distant parts. As he did, he knocked him down and began to seriously try to rip Mecha apart.

Spark and Slasher came upon them at the same time, and would never forget what they saw: Robo Knux was kneeling over Mecha, using the stump of his arm to hold Mecha's head still. With the other hand, he was driving his knuclaws into Mecha's head over and over, tearing into the hardware inside, shattering the glass eyes, pulling away the metal hull. R.K was hissing over and over, "Mercy is for the weak. I show no mercy." Mecha was no longer struggling. He lay limp and motionless, silent.

The lasers struck Robo Knux from two directions almost at the same time. His midsection was struck and pierced. He was knocked over by the impact, but was not yet destroyed. He leaped to his feet, glaring first at Slasher overhead, then at Spark, standing at a distance. R.K made a perfect target. The two shot him over and over, but each time the robot only gave a hysterical laugh. "He is dead!" he shouted at them. "You will NEVER repair him! Yes, destroy me, but I have destroyed HIM!"

"Hold off, Spark," Slasher called. She landed a short distance from Robo Knux, folded her wings, approached R.K and looked him in the eye. Then she whirled and struck him with her muscular tail with all her might. The robot went flying, landed hard and rolled into three inches of water at the river's edge. He shorted out almost at once and lay still, sparking and beginning to smoke.

Spark was already crouched beside Mecha; or what used to be Mecha. the robot's head was now a heap of mangled trash, the ground littered with fragments. Spark was holding the lifeless yellow-and- silver hand as Slasher approached. He looked up at her and choked, "Slash, he's dead! He's dead!"

She didn't reply for a moment, gazing down at the robot without expression. She murmured, "Greater love hath no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends." Then she knelt and gently lifted the metal body in her arms. "Pick up every little part you can find," she ordered softly.

Spark began to gather up the pieces, sobbing, "He knew! He told me he was going to die violently! He knew ..."

As the two reentered Knothole, bearing the shattered remains of the hero, they were greeted with absolute silence for half a second. Then they were surrounded by a questioning, mourning multitude. Slasher warned them away with, "Watch out, his wiring is live. Unfortunately, that's all that is alive."

The two marched straight to Rotor's workshop, the walrus and Knuckles

following. "Can you repair him?" Spark asked as Slasher laid the robot down on the workbench. The two shrugged dubiously, looking at the wrecked mess that had been Mecha.

They tried. For days they tried, welding, patching, cleaning, but to no avail. Too much hardware had been destroyed by Robo Knux's claws or melted by the napalm flames. They could not revive him.

Just as all hope was lost that Mecha could ever be salvaged, Sally had a brainwave.

\* \* \*

"What is that, Sal?" Spark asked.

They were standing in the early-morning gloom of Rotor's shop, Mecha's remains spread over a table behind them. Before them sat a small metal box without a top, showing the rows and rows of computer hardware inside. A wire ran from it to Nicole's input port, beside it.

"This is Metal Sonic," Sally said brightly, brushing her hair out of her eyes.

Spark looked at her blankly. "Huh?"

"Sally's smart," said Knuckles, sitting on a stool nearby. "We can't put Mecha's body back together, but we CAN reassemble his brain. Right there is his personality--what made him Mecha. We can access it and talk to it through Nicole."

He nodded to Sally, who said, "Nicole, activate remote computer transfer."

"Affirmative, Sally." The little computer beeped, then a screen came up, announcing the connection was established. "Open the communication channel," Sally said, growing excited.

"Channel open," Nicole replied.

"Mecha, can you hear me?" Sally asked.

A reply came out of Nicole's speaker. "Sally?" It was Mecha's voice. "What has happened to me? I cannot see or move!"

She explained the situation to him. Mecha was silent a moment after she had finished, then said slowly, "I cannot be rebuilt?"

"No," Knuckles said. "We've tried already. R.K ripped your-- uh--hull to shreds."

Another pause.

"There is no possible way I can be rebuilt?"

"None," Rotor affirmed.

"GOOD!" Mecha exclaimed.

The four looked at each other in disbelief, then said in unison,

"What?"

The robot made a sound that was remarkably like a chuckle. "I said 'good'. I do not wish to be rebuilt in that hull."

"\_I\_ can't build a robot!" Rotor said. "Not a robot as complex as you require, Mecha."

"You don't have to," the robot's voice replied. "I have already built myself a new body."

When this was greeted with bewildered silence, he explained, "The work I did in your shop, Rotor. The lumps of metal. I was mixing the bio-metal I perfected on Flicky Island. I built myself a skeleton out of that, then overlaid it with the machinery necessary to build an android. I worked personally on the Omega project, you see, but it was implanted with terbium and destroyed. It was so lifelike it was impossible to tell otherwise, correct?"

Rotor was nearly jumping up and down. "Where is it, where is it?" he begged in excitement.

Mecha's voice took on the annoying patient tone he was so good at. "Calm yourself and listen. There is a box buried behind Spark's hut. It is packed there in scraps of paper. The paper is the blueprints and documentation. Take it to the shop and run a system check to activate the machinery, then implant my intellect chips. You know, the ones talking right now."

Rotor, Knuckles and Spark burst from the hut and raced for Spark's. They immediately spotted the freshly-turned soil in the back and fell to digging with everything they had. As few inches down they struck wood. More digging uncovered the long, coffin-shaped box, the top firmly nailed on. As they were struggling to lift it, Sonic came around the corner and asked what they were doing. The three paused and looked at each other. Then Spark said, "We buried somebody by mistake."

"Sick," Sonic said. "What's in the box?"

"A body," Knuckles said ghoulishly.

"Sure," Sonic said, rolling his eyes. "What is it, really?"

The three flashed each other a grin and said, "Help us carry it and we'll see."

Sonic lent a hand in hauling the box back to Rotor's workshop, then stood and watched as they pried out the nails one by one. Sally, too, walked over and watched as they lifted the lid.

Inside the box, indeed packed securely in crumpled paper, lay Metal Sonic in the flesh. He had indeed rebuilt himself, but as a completely lifelike hedgehog. The android's eyes were closed, even his spines and fur just as real as Sonic's own.

Sally, Spark, Knuckles and Rotor were delighted and amazed, but Sonic leaped back, hands over his mouth. "Ohmigosh," he gasped, "there IS a body in there!" He bolted for the door. Spark leaped after him, calling, "Sonic, it's a robot! It's not real! Hey, somebody catch

him--"

It was not long before Sonic was set straight, and the village was alive with the news that Mecha could be rebuilt successfully.

Mecha's personality assured them that all they had to do was insert his system chips in a few key places and he could come on-line by himself. To Rotor's surprise, there were several sets of 'mind' chips that went in the robot's back, shoulders and arms. "You missed them when you tried to reformat me the first time I was here," Mecha told him. "It was how I knew who you all were."

It took two days to get all the chips in and tested. There was a large crowd of onlookers outside, and Rotor, Knux, Sally, Spark, Sonic and Slasher were jammed into the hut, on the day Rotor was to jump-start Mecha's power core.

"Here we go!" Rotor said, and turned the dial. There was a faint hum of electricity, but the blue hedgehog lying on the table didn't stir. "What's wrong?" Sally asked.

Knux held up a hand. "Let him boot up. It may take a while."

They waited, anxiously watching the motionless android. A full five minutes passed before there was any change.

Mecha's eyelids fluttered open. He lay there for a while, staring unblinkingly at the ceiling. Knuckles and Sonic grinned at each other; his eyes were dark red.

After a bit Mecha's eyes began to move, tracing around the room. They settled on the spectators, his head turning a little. He gazed at them expressionlessly for a moment, then murmured, "Please wait, systems loading." His voice was perfectly natural and a bit strange compared to the monotonous voice they were used to, but it was obviously the same one. He looked at each person in turn, slowly, thoughtfully. Then he murmured, "If this is what sight is like, I like it already." (The eyes he had made for himself were so much like the real thing Rotor had been afraid to touch them.)

Abruptly he gave a sigh--a real, breath-sigh--and sat up carefully.

"How do you feel?" Knuckles asked.

Mecha turned his head and looked at him. "You know, no one has ever asked me that before." He looked down at himself, opening and closing his hands. "Considering I have never FELT before, I FEEL fine." He slid off the table, landed on his feet and fell over. The group helped him up, but he could not stand on his own. He clutched at them for support and chuckled, "I have no internal gyroscope anymore. My stabilizers are in my ears. Unfortunately, that program has not yet loaded." He grinned at Sonic--a real grin--and said, "Hello, Ssssonic."

"Cut it out," Sonic grinned back. "I can jack your jaw now."

"And I yours--once I learn to walk!"

They carried him out the door into the sunlight. They were greeted with a rousing cheer. Mecha waved and said, "Greetings! Ah-- I can't see!" He blinked and shook his head, shading his eyes from the morning sun. "I have seen life-forms do this before," he said as his eyes adjusted. "I never knew why!"

A chuckle rippled through the crowd. Mecha said, "Hold me upright a moment; my stabilizer program is nearly installed." They held him still for a moment as the android's eyes took on a vacant stare. Then he relaxed, blinked and said, "Release me and see if I can stand on my own." They did and backed away. There stood a flesh-and-blood Metal Sonic, swaying a little, arms out to balance himself. He took a few hesitant steps, stumbled and stood up again. "No, don't assist," he said to the crowd around him. "I must learn to walk on my own or not at all."

A few hours went by. The villagers tired of escorting the robot about and returned to their former activities, but Sonic, Knux and Spark led him all about. Mecha had to see everything all over again with his new eyes, and couldn't stop exclaiming over how remarkable the colors were. He couldn't wait to put his new body through its paces, and immediately tried each program as it loaded. For instance, when his touch sensors were activated he went about touching everything--trees, rocks, grass, earth, flower petals, leaves--his delight was so great it spread to his three escorts. When 'smell' came online, he walked about, smelling everything and offering it to his companions.

Even with all the programs that loaded. many would not load until after he had shut down or 'went to sleep' that night. When he arose the next morning, Mecha found that instead of being low of fuel, he was hungry.

Eating was an all-new experience. Mecha had never handled a fork, spoon and knife before, and had extreme difficulty in getting the food to his mouth. Everyone else at the table were in silent stitches by the time he finished, as it was comical to see the solemn way he balanced the food on his fork and then snapped it up as if afraid it would escape.

Then there was the problem of co-ordination. Mecha would be walking along and suddenly trip over his own feet. He would stand up and concentrate on getting the rhythm of walking again, but would find that one foot would want to take two steps to the other's one. Thus it was that often he would stand in one place helplessly, feet crossed, and stare about him for aid.

"We should change my name to Klutz," Mecha remarked wryly one evening. He was trying to play a computer game with Tails, but his fingers would not co-ordinate well enough for him to manipulate the controls.

"Don't worry," Tails replied amiably. "You're the first person I've ever beat on this level!"

"That's comforting," Mecha muttered.

But as the days passed, Mecha slowly adjusted to being real and regained all the co-ordination he had had before, and more; his new body worked far better than his old one. And as the summer wore on,

everyone forgot he was a robot, for he ate, drank, sweated, ran naturally, swam in the river and grew tired. He was friendly and pleasant to be around, but there were some evenings he would feel a twinge of regret he was not working for his former master.

On these evenings he would go to the edge of the woods and look across the plain to the ruins of Robotropolis. After all, that had been his home most of his life. As he stood there one evening, feeling sorry for himself, Slasher padded up behind him and put a hand on his shoulder. He said nothing, and the two gazed off across the meadow together. After a moment the great raptor said, "Do you really miss it so much?"

"No," Mecha replied quietly. "Not really. I hated it. But it was my home. It was ... my life."

"This stage will pass in time," Slasher told him. "You have only been here six weeks. It will pass."

He looked up at her with his maroon eyes, which no longer glowed. "Can we fly back?"

"Sure." She crouched and he climbed up on her back. Then she spread her wings and leaped into the purple evening sky. For a moment, as they turned toward the city, Mecha's face appeared as it had before--a hard, ruthless robot. But then, as they circled back toward Knothole, the look softened, and it was impossible to tell that he was not Sonic.

The End.

End  
file.